



F1 Debrief – Go as fast as you can and hope for the best

Christine: This is F1 Debrief - Go as fast as you can and hope for the best. Coming up on this show, we talk about Alonso's surprising announcement, a McLaren Monaco meltdown and agreeing with Christian Horner. I just did a show a few days ago, I thought that was it for the next six months.

Mr C: I thought this was an annual thing.

Christine: Yea, that's what we do.

Mr C: No one signed off on this. What are we talking about? What are we here for? Why are we back again?

Christine: Well exciting news this week. Fernando Alonso and his whole 'I'm not gonna drive in Monaco, I'm gonna drive in Indy instead.'

Mr C: What a bombshell!

[Audio clip:

Zak Brown: Hello McLaren Honda fans, I have some big news today. McLaren Honda, along with Andretti, are going back to Indianapolis. We're racing the Indianapolis 500 with, guess who?

Fernando Alonso: Here I am.

Zak: What do you think?

Fernando: Yea, thanks Zak. Hello fans, yea, unbelievable. It's a dream come true, the Indy 500. What a race to enter in the USA, and hopefully win it, or try to win this fantastic possibility for me and to win with McLaren, Honda, Andretti. We'll try to have some fun and enjoy racing. So yea, let's see, and in Canada back very strong.

Zak: I hope we show them the trophy in Canada.]

Mr C: Now, do you know how you feel about this because I've gone through an entire range of emotions.

Christine: You keep changing your mind, it's very cute.

Mr C: I cannot decide whether I think this is a good idea or not. Initially, when the news first broke, I was like, oh my goodness. This is exciting, this is unusual, I don't remember this happening in the entire time we've been doing Sidepodcast. Fernando Alonso is a major name, Monaco is a major race in the Formula One calendar, and he's not going to be there. That's huge.

Christine: So Alonso wants to do that three thing, where they are the F1 champion, the Indy 500 champion



and the Le Mans champion, but usually people wait until after they've finished in F1 to go about that. But he's doing it now, and McLaren are obviously happy to let him. So he's going to miss the Monaco race, and yea, I don't think it's going to make too much difference at all really.

Mr C: Because of the position that McLaren would be in anyway, the place they are gonna finish given their relative performance.

Christine: Yea, they're not going to do very well so with or without Alonso, it's probably going to end up the same.

Mr C: It seems reasonable to suggest, and not being in any way harsh, but they probably aren't going to finish the race. It would be rare, I think, to see two Hondas get to the end of any Grand Prix this year, especially a circuit like Monaco which is not great on cooling and is probably going to destroy the engine, especially if it's a warm day. So Alonso is not expected to finish that race, so in that sense it's not a loss. But it is a loss in terms of PR and, you know, he's still a big name. He's a big presence in Formula One and not to have him at your jewel event of the year does seem like Formula One might be missing out.

Christine: Well, it's interesting that you say PR, because this was the idea of Zak Brown, who is new to the team and is all about the commercial side of things, and you know, getting headlines where you can. But he's obviously not quite thinking about putting the running of the F1 team first, he's more thinking about the big picture.

Mr C: That is the big picture of Formula One in America, I guess. But the thing with Zak Brown is, his job is to find sponsors for the McLaren team and thus far he hasn't done that.

Christine: Early days though.

Mr C: Okay, fine, but he's not done what he's meant to be doing.

Christine: Also, would you sponsor that team?

Mr C: Well, depends what the price is, obviously. Depends what they're charging or what they're after. His job is to create good news and thus far McLaren's season has been nothing but bad news. So in that sense, it's a great spin on what would otherwise be a terrible situation and it placates Fernando Alonso, who is obviously far better than that Honda is allowing him to be. So it solves two problems in one which is very clever but I do feel like maybe, it's a risk. It is a big risk.

Christine: I did read somewhere that Zak was using all the tricks he has in negotiating with a happy, for a happy Alonso. Not that they're worried about losing him this year but his future is going to be up for discussion this year and if they came him happy, they might be able to keep him on board. But yea, the IndyCar race, it is quite dangerous, so there is that aspect of it.

Mr C: Quite?

Christine: But Alonso's missed two races in the last two years, so really, it's not going to make any difference.



Mr C: As in, he's been injured in Formula One already? Okay, but Formula One is, I guess we've lost a driver in Formula One too. It just feels like IndyCar doesn't have the same safety standards that Formula One has and ovals especially are very, very dangerous. And I'm concerned that we're not going to get Alonso back in one piece. It's a really, really dangerous race. The Indy 500, that's a massive course, super fast, in a car that he's not got very much time to acclimatise too and a style of racing that he will definitely not be used to.

Christine: Yea, he said, with the announcement he said: "I've never raced an IndyCar car before, and neither have I ever driven on a super-speedway..."

Mr C: Right.

Christine: "...but I'm confident that I'll get to grips with it fast. I've watched a lot of IndyCar action on TV and online..."

Mr C: So have I!

Christine: "...and it's clear that great precision is required." I mean, yea, I've seen some of it online so I think I could do it too.

Mr C: Oh my god. Does he... he's a sensible, smart, intelligent person, he must have given this a lot of thought and I understand this crown thing, this triple grand slam whatever it is where you win three races, is important to him. And he's obviously keen to ensure that he's still in the Formula One shop window. If his contract is out at the end of this year, he wants other teams to be thinking of the name Fernando Alonso, and this is one way to do it. It's a great way to do it, if what you're looking for is coverage, exposure, and people to be looking at you, then he's ticked all of those boxes but isn't it just a tiny bit too risky to do this particular race at this particular time?

Christine: Well, I also wonder if because he's been at the back or at the back of the midfield for so long, not just at McLaren but even before that with his many times at Renault and stuff, I wonder if that just builds a frustration so that you need to go out there and do something extreme so this is what he's gone for.

Mr C: Fernando Alonso is a brilliant driver. That much is assured. His place in the history books, absolutely guaranteed. He hasn't got the world championships he deserves but I think it's acknowledged throughout the paddock and throughout Formula One fans that he is a great driver. What Fernando Alonso isn't particularly well known for, or particularly good at, is making smart decisions. He never seems to be in the best car at the best time, he always seems to be in the wrong car at the wrong time. And if you're a person who is not known for making the greatest and cleverest of decisions, if you're now suggesting that you want to go take part in this incredibly dangerous race, shouldn't somebody take him aside and say 'is that wise'?

Christine: Well the trouble is that the somebody that should do that is the boss of the team, and it was the boss of the team's idea. Zak actually suggested it to him and Alonso was like 'yea, I'll do that.'

Mr C: Right, has Zak got Alonso's best interests at heart, I wonder?



Christine: That's the question.

Mr C: I get he wants to keep him for further years and maybe there's a plan that ensures Alonso will be around and this is a great way to gain Alonso's trust and to curry favour with the guy but there is a genuine safety concern here. Like I said, at the beginning, I was excited by this. Throughout the day of the announcement, I sort of, my interest waned a bit and now I've sort of come round to the idea that this is actually probably a pretty terrible idea.

Christine: You're not the only one that thinks it might be dangerous. There was an interview with Daniel Ricciardo who said he would prefer to do NASCAR because IndyCar scares him.

Mr C: Yep.

Christine: He also said he could understand Alonso's frustrations because it's a long race if you're not fighting at the front, but he did also say: "If he's been given that opportunity, I probably would take it as well, in his position, at his age."

Mr C: Ricciardo said...

Christine: Cheeky little monkey.

Mr C: In his position, at his age. Yea, Alonso isn't that young. Time is moving on, but Montoya's still in IndyCar now I think and Montoya hasn't raced in F1 for years. There is plenty of time for Alonso to tackle this at a time after his Formula One career has ended. IndyCar's cannot be as demanding to drive, or whatever the reason is that allows a big guy like Montoya to continue to race in that series at whatever age he's at, surely that must mean that Alonso could do it once his Formula One career has come to an end.

Christine: Yea, and there is an aspect of this where you have to wonder if it reflects badly on Formula One. Because we know that Alonso is doing this because the McLaren is terrible. I did think it was funny in the announcement on the McLaren site, they had a picture of all the McLaren people and the Honda people and Alonso, they were all giving a thumbs up. But it was only the McLaren people that were smiling. All the Honda looked like they were begrudgingly giving that a thumbs up because they know what it means, they know how that reflects badly on their car, on their engine.

Mr C: Well, it's their fault ultimately. If Honda had delivered an amazing package this year, this discussion wouldn't be happening. Because if McLaren were in a points-paying position, they wouldn't dare risk their star driver, the only guy with a chance of bringing them points. They wouldn't dare let this happen. It wouldn't have happened in Ron's day, either.

Christine: No.

Mr C: This is very un-McLaren. It's no longer the McLaren team of old, is it? This is an entirely new beast.



Christine: It reflects badly on McLaren. But I wonder if it reflects badly on Formula One as a whole that one of the top drivers is just choosing to do something else.

Mr C: This is a wake up call for Formula One, I'm sure. Firstly, we have an engine formula at the moment and that is a problem that needs to be solved and you don't want this much importance being on one specific area of any car, be it aero, be it tyres, be it engine, whatever. You want a more equal formula and the sport has to wake up to that and has to work towards solving this problem. You don't want your top stars not at the front of the grid, and you don't want your top stars in a whole other continent during the most important race of the whole year, or at least the most visible race of the year. So, I'm sure up and down the paddock, this has given people a lot of food for thought. I mean, not many people are saying that much. There's Horner come out and criticised, Christian Horner came out and criticised the move but I don't think many people have been too outspoken about it, even though I'm sure internally there's a lot of questions being asked.

Christine: Yea, Christian Horner was particularly outspoken about it. I mean, I guess he has experience of dealing with difficult drivers but he was not impressed. He said: "It's a difficult one for Fernando as he is having a tough time. Zak has this problem. He has a depressed driver on his hands and he's trying to keep him motivated. He has come up with this idea to send him to Indianapolis, but he must be barking mad. It is the nuttiest race I have ever seen. There's no testing. He is just going to jump in the car. Turn 1 is a proper turn as well, it's not easy flat all the way around. So I think he needs to see a psychiatrist personally." I mean those are some fighting words.

Mr C: That's amazing. In some ways Horner's actually changed my mind, because like I say at the beginning I was very excited by this, and I'm sort of coming around to Christian's way of thinking. Do we know what Alonso's schedule is? Does he have any time for testing? Is it basically jump in that car, go as fast as you can and just hope for the best?

Christine: From what I understand, any time now, after this race weekend, he's gonna fly out there, get a seat fitting, have a look round the team, get to know people. And then he has to come back and obviously do his Formula One duties.

Mr C: Mm, begrudgingly.

Christine: Yea, and after the Spanish Grand Prix, as soon as possible, he's gonna fly out and be in the car. But I think there's only a day or only a couple of days before practice begins, because it's a week long of stuff, isn't it?

Mr C: The build up to the Indy 500 is more than a week. See, I haven't watched it in years, I can't remember, but best of my knowledge is they do, they have a couple of days practice, then it's straight into qualifying which lasts for several days, and then you have the race itself. It does go on for a long time, but it just occurred to me, the other problem Alonso's got is because the race prior to the Monaco Grand Prix that he's skipping is the Spanish Grand Prix, that's his home race, which he obviously can't skip because of his home fans. So even if he wants, you could argue that maybe take a couple of races out, you know, one race to do some build up. But actually, it's the exact wrong race that precedes the Monaco Grand Prix. He



could skip Russia I guess but I bet that's too late notice, and so it's really almost terrible timing. It is the worst timing for Alonso, he's got not window of opportunity to get up to speed.

Christine: Not everyone is against it though, we asked Pat of Too Much Racing for his thoughts because he is an IndyCar expert and we are not. He said: "In essence, I've watched Indycar since 2001, properly since 2008. The 500 was nothing really. Now it is really something again. The entire form of racing nearly died a decade ago. And now it is attracting active F1 drivers for the first time in thirty years. And it is with McLaren, of all teams. Imagine Ron allowing that! Then put it into context of Wehrlein at the Race of Champions. This shouldn't be happening. It's awesome."

Mr C: So a couple of points there. I do think this is very good for the Indy 500, and for IndyCar. I don't think they've got anything to lose from this, unless they literally send him home in a box, I don't think there's any bad, there's any downside to what IndyCar are getting out of this, and I think he's with the Andretti team, isn't he? So they're set to gain. The point about the Race of Champions is interesting though, because we saw what happened to Wehrlein. He took an injury during a non-Formula One racing event and he had to miss the first two races.

Christine: Yea, which is why it was quite confusing that you were really excited about this news to start with, because it seemed like you weren't keen on drivers doing curricular activities and now you've come back round to that way of thinking. He will be running with the Andretti team and his teammates include Ryan Hunter-Reay, Marco Andretti, Takuma Sato, Alexander Rossi, and another one-off rookie Jack Harvey. Yay for Sato!

Mr C: That's two drivers with Formula One experience who could help Alonso. That's quite a good line up, if that team share their data and if the teammates will help Alonso, that works in his favour I think. Certainly Sato, I mean it's been a while since he's been in Formula One but Rossi was in a Caterham not so long ago, so it may be that his teammates play a large part in whether he sinks or swims in this opening attempt.

Christine: Yea, well, there's talk of, like... everyone is saying, could he win it? Which seems really bizarre to me because we're wondering whether he's gonna make it to the end. But apparently the Honda car has won it, or won it last year, so he's gonna be in a good car and he's got good teammates. But I really don't think he's going to win it, that would be something ridiculous.

Mr C: I wonder if it's the kind of race that you could fluke a win in. Like, is it all about skill at the Indy 500 or is it as much about timing, as much about luck, as much about... I mean the guy still has to get the car to the chequered flag in order to have a chance of winning and I'm not optimistic that that would happen but let's say he gets a grip on these cars, let's say they're easier to drive than maybe we're expecting, and it's not as dangerous as it used to be. Maybe they've made major strides in terms of safety over at IndyCar, I don't actually know, I'm genuinely not following it anywhere near close enough to say either way, but if Alonso can still be running at the end of the race, maybe it's the kind of thing you can just fluke a win in and that would be... what a story would that be!

Christine: That would be amazing, and it would tick another thing off his list, he'd just have to do Le Mans next year, regardless of what race that clashes with. So we should probably also talk about who is coming



in to replace him. It's no surprise to find that Jenson Button is having to come back, and I say 'having' because he's trying to say that he's happy and excited about it but I don't believe him.

Mr C: It's an obligation. He's contracted to be the McLaren third driver, and so when the phone call came and it said 'we need you in the car', I suppose he has no justifiable reason not to? I don't get the impression, just from following the guy on social media, that he's that into the sport this year.

Christine: No, well, we were discussing that last time, the difference between him and Rosberg. Rosberg has been tweeting non-stop about his following F1. Button has said nothing and he's been concentrating on his triathlon business. He's super fit, which is a good thing, but yea, I feel like he would really rather not.

Mr C: I suppose in his favour, the McLaren isn't going to do more than a lap, right, in the race. It's going to break down on the main straight on lap two, isn't it? So I guess he just turns up, he gets a nice sun tan, gets to hang out on his boat, is obliged to drive one or two laps of the car, and then that's his obligations over and done with for the weekend. The other question is, Jenson has had no testing in these new cars. He's not tried the new tyres, he's not tried the new chassis. I mean, I suppose it's not going to be that much different if the car is as slow as it is, but Monaco is not the kind of venue that you just want to rock up and take your first stab at it. Those walls are really, really, really, really close.

Christine: He does know Monaco really well, obviously, living there, and he's won that race that before. So he's good with Monaco. And he also said he would be driving the car in the sim beforehand, but again I don't know how well that's going to prepare you for something like Monaco, especially the chaos of first lap fun.

Mr C: And you know, you're assuming that it's going to be a dry race. If it's a wet race, it could be even worse. It's gonna be... yea, he's not in a great position. I feel like if I was Jenson Button I would be unhappy about this situation whichever way you look at it. I'd be really annoyed at Alonso right now, and especially annoyed at Zak.

Christine: Well, Button said he was thrilled to be making his one-off return and it's one of his all-time favourite race tracks. He also said: "As for Fernando, I hope he not only fares well at Indy but enjoys it too. It'll be a great experience for him. He's an excellent driver, as we all know, and he's very experienced, so, although super-speedway driving techniques will be all-new to him, I expect him to get to grips with it all pretty quickly. And on Sunday evening, after the Monaco Grand Prix, I'll sit down and watch him do his stuff on TV. I'm looking forward to that too." So, he's got faith.

Mr C: I am gonna do the same. Are you gonna watch it? I think this is something we're gonna have to... this is going to be unmissable television.

Christine: Yea, I don't know if it's in my timezone but I really, really want to. Which just proves it's doing the job for Indy, we all want to see what's going to happen.

Mr C: What do you think's going to happen? I've told you what I think's gonna happen, what's Christine's opinion?

Christine: I think that he will get to the end and he'll do very well, but he won't win it, it won't be, you



know, massive. Won't be any big news stories coming out of it, he'll just get to the end and he'll come back and have to race in his Formula One car again.

Mr C: Do you think watching Monaco will be the same without him?

Christine: Yea, like I said, I don't think it's going to make any difference. We've got Vandoorne and now we've got Button. I'm gonna get very confused what year we're in.

Mr C: Can we talk about retirements, by the way? Because at the end of last year, Massa said 'right, that's it, I'm out of here, I'm off, I've had enough of this.'

Christine: Yep, he's back.

Mr C: He's back. Nico said 'alright, I'm off.' He keeps turning up.

Christine: Yea.

Mr C: I mean, at least he's not in the car. Jenson Button said 'that's it, I've had enough, I'm off.'

Christine: He's back.

Mr C: He's coming back. I think Formula One reasons have very, for different reasons and a lot of it is not down to their own decisions, but Formula One drivers have a major problem with retiring and saying goodbye to the sport.

Christine: Yea, you just can't escape it, but it is creating a really interesting storyline, and it's a lot of dynamics that we haven't had for the past few years. We've got interesting driver decisions, and other races, and people coming in and out, and it's all just fascinating stuff.

Mr C: It is. I want to be positive about this. It's a great storyline. Let me say that, I do feel like I've been slightly negative on this show. I think it's a great storyline, I think it's good for motorsport as a whole, I suspect it's slightly bad for Formula One...

Christine: You're just worried about poor Alonso, that's all it is. You just care for him.

Mr C: I just want the guy to come back in one piece. I really do, and you know, like with Wehrlein and with Kubica who did the rallying, it just feels like when Formula One drivers are sort of, they get sucked into the safety of Formula One. Everything in Formula One is checked, double checked, triple checked, whatever. You have the safest circuits, the safest cars, with the best medical expertise, and Formula One drivers get somewhat blasé about that, I guess they assume it's the normal, they just forget how dangerous driving can be. Then you go off and do something crazy like rallying and ruin your career or whatever. And it just, I just worry that everything is not quite as safe and sound as Formula One. And Formula One isn't perfect, there's obviously places it can improve but I think it's a step ahead of what IndyCar have. It's certainly a step ahead of what they used to have, and maybe they've made some major changes, but I do worry. I do want him to come back. I would like to see him do well in Formula One again in the future, and he can't do that if he's plastered halfway up the Indy 500 wall.



Christine: Well, we can't leave the show on that, that's a terrible image.

Mr C: Sorry.

Christine: I've got a quote from Éric Boullier here, he said: "Fernando will be back at the wheel of the McLaren in Montreal, and I hope he'll have some great stories to bring back to us from Indianapolis. You couldn't get two more different racetracks than Monaco and Indy – one of them a twisty and bumpy street course and the other a mega-high-speed banked super-speedway bowl – but that's the beauty of our sport. And it underlines the fact that we're racers, above everything else.

Mr C: That is, alright I grant you, that's a better way to end the show. But please, please don't hurt Alonso.